DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 372 893 RC 019 715

AUTHOR Rudnitski, Rose A.
TITLE In the Thick of Things: When Teachers Initiate Local School Reform.
PUB DATE Apr 94
NOTE 23p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New Orleans, LA, April 1994).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Change Agents; Community Attitudes; Educational Change; High Schools; Interviews; *Resistance to Change; *Rural Schools; *School Community Relationship; *School Restructuring; Secondary Schools; Small Schools; Student Attitudes; *Teacher Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS Coalition of Essential Schools

ABSTRACT

This case study examines an effort to restructure secondary education in a small rural Massachusetts public high school. Data documenting the change process include archival records, participant observation, and interviews and questionnaires conducted with community members, school staff, and students in grades 7-12. The restructuring effort occured over 3 years, was teacher initiated, and was supported financially by a Carnegie Planning Grant. This paper debunks the myth of universality often ascribed to rural communities by describing the complications involved in creating school change in a rural community composed of multiple voices. A school restructuring committee made up of teachers, administrators, students, and community members developed a plan that featured high expectations for all students, less movement between classes, heterogeneous grouping, and fewer subjects to study at one time. The plan received support from the majority of the community but also encountered persistent, vocal opposition. Eliminating school tracking was the major source of controversy. The vocal minority, made up in equal proportions of teachers, students, and community members, was dissatisfied and disaffected, arguing that the changes represented decreasing opportunities for the traditional college-bound population. This minority was overwhelmingly middle-class and high-achieving as well as relatively coherent and articulate. In the face of student transfers and dissipating community support, the school district reformulated its collective vision to accommodate the minority without disaffecting the majority. (MNL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 372 893

IN THE THICK OF THINGS:

WHEN TEACHERS INITIATE LOCAL SCHOOL REFORM

Rose A. Rudnitski

School of Education

State University of New York

College at New Paltz

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Rose A. Rudnitski

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, April, 1994.

RC 019715

The school has been called the "crucible of social values, a microcosm of expectations for the children of the community" (English & Hill, 1990, p.11). This is especially true of the rural secondary school, which tends to play a prominent role in the community. Rural schools are frequently the single largest employers in their areas, occupy the largest public buildings, which are the sites of many public events, and are the largest portion of the local budget (Mellencamp et al., 1991). This paper is a preliminary case study of the effort to restructure secondary education in a small, public Massachusetts high school, called here by the pseudonym, Berkshire High School. The information is based on archival records, evaluation reports, participant observation, and recent questionnaires and interviews conducted with the community, staff and students in grades 7-12 at the school.[1]

Significance of This Study

Though much has been written on the restructuring of urban high schools in the past decade, there is little research available on restructuring in small, rural settings. This is unfortunate, since 75% of the school districts in the United States are classified as small, with fewer than 2500 students, or very small, with fewer than 1000 students, and 51% of school districts are classified as both small and rural by the National

---

[1] The author gratefully acknowledges the cooperation and assistance of the staff, administration, and community of the school involved in this study.

Rural Small Schools Task Force (1988). Many national reports have called for changes in school structures at the most basic levels, but none have focused on the challenges faced by small, rural schools in effecting those changes, though these schools suffer from some of the same problems as urban schools in postmodern society. These problems include more disinterested students who are able to legally leave school, school safety, different expectations for differently tracked students, and decreased parental involvement (Mellencamp et al., 1991) With a majority of schools in rural settings facing those issues with fewer teachers, limited time and resources, and teacher isolation, especially at the secondary level, more research is needed on rural schools as they progress in their attempt to reorganize in order to meet the needs of ALL students, a reorganization that is at the core of the restructuring movement (Murphy, 1991).

Thematic Framework

The School Context

Values

Restructuring schools is a process of change, and with the school as the focal point for community aspirations for youth, the context for educational change becomes value-laden. The potential for controversy is magnified because the parents and community feel empowered to make local school policy decisions through elected school boards and school budget elections. English and Hill note that "schools may be the last vestige of

grass roots democracy, the only place where local and individual influence can still make a difference" (1990, p.11). In a value-laden context with participants who feel that their values have the potential to prevail or be dominated by others, the air becomes ripe for debate and dissension. The conflict can be exacerbated by attempting to accommodate a broader base of values than the traditional school structure has contained. Those whose values were reflected in the narrower model are more likely to be empowered to protest changes that they view as lessening their influence.

The Universality Myth

There is also potential for dissension when a change is adopted by the majority or centralized decision-makers, who change a central feature of the school, one that affects all students and teachers, thinking that if it is good for some, it is good for everyone. Eisner and Vallance call this the universality myth (1975). In a rural setting, where the capacity for a wide variety of educational offerings and program configurations is less feasible, even small changes may affect everyone, and all may be required to fit one model, rather than have a choice of models within one school, as is possible in urban settings with school-within-a-school structures to accommodate different values and purposes.

Differences in Pace

Stager and Fullan (1992) describe another source of potential conflict between the school institution and the

community in terms of incongruence in the pace at which each changes.

> A fundamental problem in education is the juxtaposition of a school system which is not known for its capacity to change alongside a dynamic environment which demands continuous, multifaceted change. Until the educational system learns to deal with change as a basic capacity, there will be clashes and aggravation between education and other sectors in society (p.1).

For this reason, schools must develop the capacity for continuous change and improvement in order to meet the needs of society. In order for this to happen, according to Stager and Fullan, teachers must become skilled change agents with a strong sense of moral purpose.

Community Traditions

Communities hold traditions that may set limitations on the scope of organizational and instructional change in a school. Bradley (1985, cited in English & Hill, 1990) described community traditions as informal beliefs held as norms in a community. Community traditions are assumed to be true, and alternatives to them are rarely offered as explanations for behavior or events. All communities have traditions regarding their schools, some positive, and some negative. Strong negative traditions, such as a belief that the local teachers are not competent or creative could seriously mar efforts to place teachers in the position of change agent or as initiators of change.

The Role of the Teacher

Teachers are central to the change process in schools, and

can experience change either as initiators of ideas or as implementers of the ideas of others (Sarason, 1982; 1990; Lieberman, 1990; Lieberman, Darling-Hammond, & Zuckerman, 1991). Teachers who are change agents start as individuals to develop as change agents by defining their moral purpose through the process of building a personal vision, a value-laden activity. Schools embarking on the road to change agency must also build a cultural vision at the outset, defining the values espoused by the group. In fact, according to Stager and Fullan, individuals and institutions go through parallel processes in the change process. For individual teachers, the process entails personal vision-building; inquiry; mastery; and collaboration. For institutions, change entails shared vision-building; organizational structures, norms and practices of inquiry; organizational development and know-how; and collaborative work (Stager & Fullan, 1992).

Even in a small group of teachers, it is possible for each to be at a different stage in this change process. It is also possible for some to reach plateaus of stagnation because they do not want to change or, perhaps, collaborate. Stager and Fullan assert that collaboration is essential for both personal learning and organizational improvement.

> There is a ceiling effect on how much can be learned if we keep to ourselves. The ability to collaborate - on both a small and large scale - is becoming one of the core requisites of postmodern society. Personal strength, as long as it is open-minded (i.e., inquiry-oriented) goes hand-in-hand with effective collaboration...People need one another to learn to accomplish things. Without collaborative skills and relationships it is not possible to learn and to continue to learn as much as is needed to become an agent for societal improvement (1992, p.7).

Just as it is possible for the school to be at a different stage than its context and to change at a different rate, so is it possible for teachers to be at different stages in the change process and to experience it at different rates. Though the number of participants in a rural setting may be few, and the overall sense of community strong, the potential for disparity in ability or desire to change exists nonetheless (Mellencamp et al., 1991).

Overview of the Study

This is the story of the change process, primarily as it has occurred over a period of three years in a small, rural secondary school in Massachusetts, Berkshire High School. This paper will focus on the issues raised when the teachers in the Berkshire High School, after being designated a Carnegie School, and granted funding for restructuring in 1988, developed a shared vision, which loosely corresponded with the Nine Common Principles of the Coalition of Essential Schools (See Sizer, 1984 & 1992). The teachers held a number of public meetings, and after consultation with the community, decided that their vision for a better school centered on the concept of student-as-worker, teacher-as-coach, with teaching and learning focused on the student, and not on the teacher or the institution. Learning would be enhanced by high expectations for ALL students, less movement between classes, heterogeneous grouping and the elimination of tracking, and fewer subjects to study at one time. This vision precipitated a decision to investigate joining the

Coalition of Essential Schools and a radical change in the school schedule for the 450 students in grades 7 through 12. This schedule, the Odyssey Program was implemented in 1991. These features, the detracking of the high school, the schedule change, the issues surrounding them, and the changes they engendered are the focus of this paper. Though the Coalition of Essential Schools is mentioned, it was not a central feature of this study.

The School Context

The Berkshire High School is in the scenic Berkshire Mountain region of western Massachusetts. It is part of the first regional school district in the state of Massachusetts, and one of the first such districts in the United States. The area has a full-time population of approximately 6200 residents, with a largely service and tourist-based economy.

There are approximately 450 students, thirty-five professional staff, and twenty support staff involved with the secondary students at the Berkshire Middle and High School. The school claims to have been involved in the restructuring process since 1983. In 1988, when they received a Carnegie Planning grant from the state, the staff became involved in producing an actual vision and restructuring plan of action. They established a planning team comprised of teachers, administrators, students, parents, and community members. The planning team conducted a needs assessment and found that "parents were looking for students to be challenged, students were looking for learning that had more meaning to them, and teachers were looking for ways

to effectively respond" (Odyssey Handbook, 1992, p.3).

The staff decided that they needed staff development in cooperative learning, learning styles, and the elements of effective instruction. Their commitment to the concepts of student as worker and teacher as facilitator grew, and they realized that they had to have more time in each class if they were to change to those roles from their traditional ones.

The planning team proposed a semester schedule, with three 90 minute blocks of time each day for three academic classes per semester, and one 45 minute block for what they called Interest Blocks or I-Blocks. These courses included everything from first aid, cake decorating, computer-aided drafting, desktop publishing, journalism, critical thinking, and set design. Students did not receive credit or a grade for their I-Block courses. At the same time, they did away with all honors classes and scheduled students heterogeneously, the first secondary school in its region to do so to such a broad extent. Although they retained Advanced Placement classes in four subjects, these classes were open to all students who felt that they wanted to try them. (See Appendix A for the schedule.)

Majority Response

Most members of the school community responded favorably to the schedule and tracking changes. The three annual evaluation reports concluded that the Odyssey Program was a success. The Executive Summary of the second evaluation reported the following findings, which were borne out in the first and third evaluations

as well:

- Parents, teachers, and School Committee members strongly support Odyssey.
- The curriculum and instructional strategies used by teachers in the long blocks are varied, experience-based, and engaging.
- Students overwhelmingly feel more positively about the school, their teachers, and the administrators under the Odyssey Plan than in the previous year.
- Student achievement, as reflected in grades earned, has risen in all departments; in some classes, this has been quite dramatic.
- Student achievement, as reflected in final grade point average, has improved in general; the achievement of last year's seniors dropped a bit compared to the previous class.
- Student attendance has improved slightly; lateness to school has increased somewhat (Odyssey Handbook, 1992, p.18).

Though the above findings were true for a clear majority of about 75% of the school community, there was a disturbing minority in equal proportions among teachers, students, and community members, which was dissatisfied and disaffected. That group continued to resist and sometimes openly protest the change in schedule and the elimination of the honors track.

The Change Agents

A core of highly motivated teachers were the primary force in the shift from a traditional, tracked high school with a schedule based on Carnegie Units to a restructured high school with a block schedule and heterogeneous classes. On the whole, the teachers were a very stable staff, with an average time in the district of more than 10 years. The change agents were

veterans and felt a need to change as their students had changed over time. They went through Stager and Fullan's first two steps of vision-building and inquiry, carefully studying elements that they thought would help them successfully implement the new schedule. They attended staff development workshops on their own time during the summer months and worked to improve their own teaching practices in small increments according to their own personal visions. However, these teachers had little time to spend reinforcing and mastering the new skills they had learned during the staff development workshops on cooperative learning, learning styles, and effective teaching. Their colleagues who were not involved in the restructuring did not participate in this personal, incremental change process. The change agents were eager to get moving, and implemented the schedule in the fall of 1991, despite the lack of participation of some of the staff and the protestations of a small, but strongly vocal minority of parents who were concerned that the teachers would not be able to meet the needs of a diversity of students in classes of 20 to 25 students.

Community Traditions

In New England, the tradition of the town meeting has fostered a community tradition that all voices should be heard when public policy decisions are made. The group of dissenting parents and community members attended informational meetings on the new schedule and vocally protested at length. When they felt that they were not heard, they protested more loudly, and for a

broader audience. The dissenting group wrote letters to the local newspaper questioning the school's decision and the effectiveness of the teachers. They persisted throughout the three years that the Odyssey Program was in effect.

A feature of being in a small, rural community with a stable high school staff was that many of the parents of the students had graduated from the high school, and had been students of some of the current teachers. The former principal, a 25 year veteran of the district who left in the summer of 1993 after the second year of the Odyssey program, recounted community information meetings where parents raised their concerns without regard for the feelings of the teachers. The disaffected parents mentioned teachers by name, and shouted that, "So and so was boring for 45 minutes. What makes you think that he's going to be more interesting for twice that amount of time?"

The program has been evaluated yearly since its inception, and though the teachers have sought staff development in interdisciplinary curriculum and instructional strategies, the community tradition has persisted in the form of a belief by some of the community that the teachers are not up to the task. A majority of students reported in the annual evaluation that they did not agree with a statement that their teachers were competent. In 1991, 74% of the students disagreed with the statement that their teachers were competent; 56% disagreed in 1992, and 65% disagreed in 1993 (Rossman, 1991; 1992; 1993).

Recently, as part of a public relations effort, and to

disseminate information on the Coalition of Essential Schools, the school sent home an 8 minute video on the Coalition to be vieved as part of a homework assignment for the seventh and eighth grade students and their parents. They were to answer three questions about the video based on what they liked the most, liked the least, and found to be most memorable. Community traditions, even in the context of a video homework assignment, were evident in the responses. One fourth of the community respondents questioned the ability of the school's teachers to teach like the teachers depicted in the video, though they were not asked to do so. This parent was typical of that group in her negative focus on the teacher in responding to the video:

> I liked: a) concept of teacher as fascilitator [sic].
> b) long blocks for in depth if teachers are truly fulfilling this goal. 1 1/2 hrs. of the same old lecture is one of my greatest nightmares for myself and my children!! or 1 hr. for lecture and 1/2 hr. to do homework.
>
> I questioned or didn't like:
> a) the ability or true intention of assessing whether staff (all) is meeting the above responsibility.
> b) the potential for a lack of continuity!
>
> My greatest concern:
> • Real life example: My son, a senior, spent 12 months in the middle of his high school career with no requirement for one book read or one paper written.

Backlash

Stager and Fullan saw the need for the school to develop the capacity for continuous change in a continuously changing context. In this case, a majority in the school community wanted to change in response to what they perceived as a changing

student population, while some wanted to maintain the status quo, especially in the honors track at the high school. Many in the latter group simply opted to leave the school. The state of Massachusetts instituted interdistrict school choice throughout the state at the same time that the Berkshire High School Planning Team implemented the Odyssey Program. That year, 14 to 34 students left the district, depending on who reported the figures. In such a small school, that amounted to three to seven percent of the total student body, though most of the students were eighth graders who chose to go to a traditional high school in a neighboring school district. A total of 60 students have chosen to attend other high schools since Odyssey was initiated. This significant reduction in the number of high-achieving students affected the school's test scores, which were, and continue to be consistently some of the lowest among comparable schools in the state in all subject areas. SAT scores for the Berkshire High School followed a similar pattern. Test scores actually fell slightly each year after Odyssey was implemented.

The dissenting minority was a relatively coherent, articulate group. Though unorganized as a formal entity, they shared some characteristics. They were overwhelmingly middle class and high-achieving. They were the traditional college bound population, viewing what they perceived as the demise of the traditional pathways to college acceptance and academic success. They expressed concern that their children would not be accepted to high quality colleges and that they might not be

developing the skills necessary for success if they were accepted. Those who chose to remain in the district expressed feelings of helplessness and disenfranchisement. They felt that decisions about what their children need were being made for them on the basis of the needs of the majority, who were largely unmotivated and disinterested in traditional school. These parents perceived that their values were no longer the overwhelmingly dominant values reflected in the school structure, curriculum and teaching.

The disenfranchised parents also felt that the decision to change had been made by a small group of teachers. One parent succinctly put it this way, "Disliked - A small group of teachers deciding the needs of the students," while another was more lengthy

> There was no issue of "like" or "dislike" - the film attempted to sell the Sizer method, the one that recently received the $500,000,000 Annenberg grant, and which obviously will now prevail. This "education" will engage the dangerously vacuous youth for a while. That is its purpose, but what has it to do with my daughter who is neither ignorant nor dangerous: who is, will be and always has been, "engaged," intelligent, serious, reflective?

The dissenting parents expressed a common concern held by this group of parents and students - that while the longer classes may help provide a more meaningful environment for some students, they may not be as beneficial or necessary for all students. To these parents, the decision seemed to have been made by a group of teachers or some experts who knew nothing about their children and the local context.

In the Odyssey Program evaluations for 1992 and 1993, the teachers and teaching were the factors that received the most negative response from the parents and the students, who paralleled the parents' views. The students' judgment of the teaching in the long time blocks declined considerably in the second year. "Whereas teachers and their behaviors were held in high regard by most of the students in 1992, the 1993 survey results did not support that finding. Rather teachers in performance of their jobs came under substantial criticism as expressed by the 1993 survey results" (Rossman, 1993, p.7). The majority was showing signs of reflecting the views of the minority on the competence of the teachers.

The Universality Myth

The group of change agents was highly represented on the Carnegie Planning Team and the newly formed School Council, the policy decision-making body for the school. This group chose to change two formal features of the school at the same time that they were developing the teaching skills necessary to adapt to the change, themselves. They also viewed these changes as good for most and assumed that they must be good for all, the myth of universality (Eisner & Vallance, 1975).

On a individual level, though this group of teachers collaborated well with each other, they did not collaborate with colleagues who resisted the Odyssey Program and parents who protested the detracking of the school. They viewed the honors track as elitist, and did not want to see it reinstated. They

viewed the resisting teachers as incompetent or burnt out, and expressed a desire to see them retire soon. Their most common answer to the question, "What about the teachers who are not involved?" was, "We cannot wait for them." But those teachers were affecting the evaluations of the Odyssey Program. Students singled them out as lecturing for 90 minutes or as being boring during long classes. There was an apparent discrepancy in the rate that the teachers were able to change their practices, even though most were committed to longer classes in the Odyssey Program. The change agents felt little need to respond to the context, both in the school and in the community as long as they were in the majority. From the evaluation data, it seemed that the majority was dissipating.

Stager and Fullan (1992) referred to change agent teachers as having a moral purpose, a sense of improving society, as well as the skills of accomplishing change individually and collectively. The vision devised by the change agents in the Berkshire High School reflected their moral purpose in that they believed that the changes made in service of that vision supported their sense of democracy and egalitarianism. The parents and students of the traditional college bound population perceived the vision as decreasing opportunities for them. Their persistence and outspoken resistance to the changes, in conjunction with the silent resistance of the dissenting teachers caused the district to reformulate its collective vision to accommodate the minority.

Responding to the Context

The district superintendent, a person to whom many of the parents complained, decided to take action to respond to the voices of the dissenting parents and students. He felt that though they were a minority, they were essential to the success of the school and the Odyssey Program. He decided to hire an enrichment teacher for the high-achieving students for the 1993-94 school year and to launch a public relations campaign to inform parents on the Coalition of Essential Schools, which the teachers voted to join this year by a 79% majority, and to involve them in decisions regarding the school program. A School Council was formed, as mandated by the Massachusetts School Reform Act. The School Council, which acts a decision-making body, formed a subcommittee to work with parents of high-achieving eighth graders to convince them to stay in the district next year instead of choosing to attend the traditional high school in the neighboring school district.

These efforts to respond to the needs of the minority in the school community seem to be working. As of this month, no eighth grade parents have voiced an intention to send their children to another high school. The majority of the responses to the 8 minute videotape sent home with the students were positive, and many parents expressed a desire to know more about the Coalition of Essential Schools. The superintendent has designated a central office administrator to lead alternative assessment initiatives, and to assess the district's progress as it enters

the Coalition.

Conclusion

The Berkshire High School community is adjusting its restructuring process to include more voices, though the major structural changes of altering the school schedule and detracking the high school were made three years ago. The school community as a whole seems to be collaborating in more open and effective ways. The vote to enter the Coalition of Essential Schools provides the school with a more focused shared vision, while the vocal minority of parents and community members has forced the school to respond to its needs and include its voice in the new vision. The change agents and administration seem ready to collaborate with all stakeholders as long as they can maintain the common principles of the Coalition and work toward their vision of good teaching and learning.

This school presents a model of change because a core of veteran teachers initiated major structural changes there in response to their collective vision of a good high school. They forged ahead in the face of resistance to the changes from all sectors and criticism of their practice as they were working on mastering new techniques to be effective facilitators in heterogeneous settings. A segment of the community was unwilling to allow the teachers time to incrementally change their teaching practices after they changed the school structure, but the teachers maintained their sense of purpose and continued the change process. Part of that process was to respond to the needs

of the dissenting minority and to adapt their vision to include all members of the community. They have redirected their efforts in this direction with the hope that community beliefs will change with evidence of improvement in their teaching. As teachers gain more experience as change agents, they need to develop the skills needed to collaborate with a variety of constituencies. The development of these skills in teachers will enhance the ability of the school to develop the capacity to continuously improve.

The change process in a school is one that parallels and responds to changes in the society. The school must be aware of the needs of its own community and respond to them as it develops the capacity for continuous change, for those changes must, ultimately reflect the needs of the local community as they aim to reflect and improve the broader society.

References

Bradley, L.H. (1985). Curriculum leadership and development handbook. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

English, F.W., & Hill, J.C. (1990). Restructuring: The principal and curriculum change, A Report of the NASSP Curriculum Council. Reston, VA: National Association of Secondary School Principals.

Lieberman, A., Darling-Hammond, L., & Zuckerman, D. (1991). Early lessons in restructuring schools. New York: National Center for Restructuring Education, Schools, and Teaching (NCREST).

Lieberman, A. (1990). Navigating the four C's: Building a bridge over troubled waters. Phi Delta Kappan, March, 531-533.

Mellencamp, A.V., Fitzgerald, M.D., & Miller, C.T. (1991). Conditions affecting the restructuring of rural secondary schools. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, IL.

Murphy, J. (1991). Restructuring schools: Capturing and assessing the phenomena. New York: Teachers College Press.

National Rural Small Schools Task Force. (1988). End of the road: Rural America's poor students and poor schools. Washington, DC: Council for Educational Development and Research.

Rousman, G. (1991; 1992; 1993). Annual evaluation reports of the odyssey Program. Sheffield, MA.

Sarason, S.B. (1982). The culture of the school and the problem of change, 2nd Edition. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Sarason, S.B. (1990). The predictable failure of educational reform. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Sizer, T.R. (1984). Horace's compromise: The dilemma of the American high school. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Sizer, T.R. (1992). Horace's school. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Stager, M., & Pullan, M.G. (1992). Teacher purpose and educational change: Moving toward a broader agenda. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, April, 1992.